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ABSTRACT

The opportunities and role of the counselor in education are expanding, partially due to the increasing numbers of Mexican American students and their demands for equal education. While many researchers have traced the problem of poor education for Mexican American children to their cultural and family background, both teachers and counselors have contributed to the situation by setting lower expectations for Mexican American students and by using rigid "tracking" systems which tend to limit student achievement. One much-heralded approach to the problem is bilingual/bicultural education. Another approach is using counselors, preferably bilingual, at all educational levels and expanding the counselor role to include parent orientation, community liaison, and student placement, as well as helping the student with problems. In particular, the counselor can assist with the growing numbers of elementary aged minority students who exhibit high anxiety and low self-concept, and the "alingual" or "bicultural illiterate" student. Currently, counselors are often misused by the institutions that employ them, but they are generally well trained. Anglo counselors must be versatile, skilled, more culturally aware of their minority students, and must know which methods work best with those clients. There are implications for both inservice and institutional training programs. (SB)

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MEXICAN-AMERICANS IN SCHOOL:

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNSELOR-EDUCATOR

John Michaelson
1978

One of the biggest problems in American education today is the failure to give the Mexican-American student an education comparable in quality to that of other minorities and, more significantly, to that of the white majority. The perpetuation of this injustice is a stigma upon our "democratic" society. It is my purpose in writing this paper to describe this problem and explore why it exists. Furthermore, I propose to delineate what educators and counselors are doing to rectify this problem at present and to discuss the implications of their actions on Mexican-American students of the future.

As stated previously, the problem at issue is enormous. It was estimated in 1970 that 5,073,000 Mexican-Americans resided in the U.S. Of that total, nearly 90% reside in the five southwestern states of California, Texas, Arizona, New Mexico and Colorado.[1] Nearly one person in four residing in California today is Mexican-American, and the nationwide population for this group may reach 9 million by 1980. The prospect of one school child in two coming from this ethnic group is a very realistic possibility in California. This prospect reaches alarming proportions when one considers the restrictions placed on this group by their collective lack of ability to cope with our educational system.

A 1969 study showed the dropout rate prior to high school graduation to be 50%.[2] A similar study in Texas placed the dropout rate for that state at 60% in 1965.[3]

A quick answer to the problem would be to cite a lack of motivation. Not so, says researcher Julia Moore. She found that Mexican-American kindergarten students were as motivated as the Anglo children. Furthermore, the minority twelfth-grade students expected further education and hoped to someday hold a professional position. It seemed those Mexican-American students who managed to make it through high school had similar values and expectations to their Anglo counterparts.[4] These findings are corroborated by Carter[5] and Nava[6].

Obviously, it is during the educational years that learning problems become evident, but it doesn't necessarily follow that the problems originate in the school setting. Most researchers trace the problem to the Mexican-American cultural heritage. Unlike the Irish or the Jewish people, the Mexican-Americans have not been easily acculturated in the great American "melting pot", choosing instead to adhere to tradition and custom.[7] Along with many customs alien to the Anglo-American culture, these people have clung to their native language. A 1965 study of 600 Mexican-American adults in San Antonio, Texas, indicated that 71% of husbands and wives spoke only Spanish to each other and 94% among

grandparents spoke only Spanish to their children.[8] Children reared in this environment suffer greatly when they enter school.

Still, the plight of the Mexican-American student can't be blamed entirely on the school system and the indigenous culture. Inseparable from these two elements is American society. Our societal structure is such that the typical Mexican-American can be relegated to only one position--the bottom rung on the class ladder. Most immigrants from Mexico are lower class people who hope to find a better life in the U.S. Instead, they find poor housing, depressed wages, and erratic employment. Should they be lucky enough to find work, they are the first to be laid off.[9] This is due in part to stereotyping. The Mexican is pictured by Americans to be "lackadaisical, individualistic, self-satisfied with their subordinate role, lazy, and imbued generally with a 'manana'attitude".[10] This unfair stereotype will be very hard to destroy, as stereotyping seems to be a basic characteristic of human nature.[11]

So what is the answer? Change society? Culture? No, the answer lies in adapting the educational process to the needs of these underprivileged people. Hopefully, through education we may someday change the more static institutions of society and culture.

To begin, stereotypes and prejudices must be eliminated from the educational system if the minorities are to receive a

"majority" education. Despite an awareness of these shortcomings, slow progress has been made only toward educational equality. For many years, the solution to "help" the Mexican-American student has been to segregate him. This segregation, called tracking, places a student in his "proper" ability group and goes a long way towards determining his future. Most educators now believe this method merely perpetrates status at birth with the low social classes preparing to leave school to fill low class slots in society little different from those slots filled by their parents.[12] "Appraisal of intellectual capacities, whether by standard tests or other means, is usually the principal determinant of track assignment.[13] I.Q. scores are the most commonly used placement device, and the result is an under-representation of Mexican-Americans in the academic curriculum and an over-representation of the same group in the Industrial Arts and Vocational curriculum.[14] In most schools, tracking is being replaced by less rigid, more diverse forms of grouping.

Not only the methods of teaching minorities have been at fault, but also the teachers themselves. A 1973 Texas study comparing teacher expectations of Mexican-Americans, Blacks, and Anglos showed that teachers "over-expected" for Anglos in the areas of third and fourth grade reading, arithmetic, and overall academic ability. They "under-expected" achievement by the Mexican-Americans in the three areas. Sadly enough--for the

minority children--the expectations were fulfilled.[15] To combat this problem, Theresa Escobedo recommends in her 1974 dissertation that cultural awareness be stressed more by teacher training institutions and that those same institutions actively seek more minority applicants.[16]

The most progressive and heralded approach to the problem of minority education is bilingualism, where courses are taught in both languages and elements of both cultures are promoted. One of the most enthusiastic proponents of bilingualism is educator and author Marcos DeLeon. The following is a summary of his recommendations for the bicultural school-community setting:

1. The creation of a core of counselors to establish and supervise programs between school and community. Counselors should be bilingual, if possible.
2. Cultural units of study on the Mexican heritage.
3. Provide compensatory programs for "slow" students utilizing guidance, counseling and tutorial resources.
4. Extend the total educational concept to Adult Education.
5. Develop continuing flexible programs of testing, guidance, and counseling which will permit early discovery of the potentials of each child.
6. Expand and modernize the Vocational program.
7. Recruit bilingual teachers, counselors, and administrators. [17]

In no less than three of his proposals, DeLeon mentions the role of the counselor. Proper utilization of the counselor in any form of education is as important as proper teaching and proper curriculum development. Perhaps it is the counselor who can best reach those confused Mexican-American children who are termed "psychological dropouts" by the time they reach fourth grade.

There is a definite, growing need for counselors at all levels, and the role of the counselor is becoming more diversified as that need increases. DeLeon mentions some of the ways in which counselors are being utilized. There are many other ways. Counselors are being used more and more as a liaison to the community. Louis E. Casaus has researched a 1973 Texas experiment with a minority parental training model to help acquaint Mexican-American parents with their children's school system. The study showed that the parents were interested in education (contrary to the prevailing stereotype!), proud of their culture, and unsure of Anglos and school officials. The model was used to promote self-concept and to promote involvement with educators.[18]

Help is also needed in the area of placement counseling. The preponderance of Mexican-American students in the low ability groupings indicates a flaw in placement techniques. Much of the problem can be attributed to culturally-biased I.Q. tests being

used for placement. Psychologists today are almost unanimous in their conclusion that people of all ethnic groups are about equal in intelligence.[19] More efficient placement techniques must be developed and implemented.

There will always be a need to counsel the "student with problems." Perhaps the student with the biggest problem is the "alingual" child (or "bicultural illiterate".) This child is characterized by self-derogation and apathy.[20] There are many Mexican-American children in school today who fit this description and they must be helped.

Problem students are surfacing more and more in the elementary grades, and their sufferings are many and varied. Mexican-American students in the Southwest are displaying high anxiety levels,[21] displaying a disproportionate amount of abnormal personality traits,[22] and displaying a low self-concept.[23] Some of these troubles are showing up as early as the fourth grade. Increasing the number of elementary counselors is a must for the future.

While the reasons behind these problems may be to some degree beyond the counselor's control, it is important to know what is causing the trouble. The myriad of problems seems to stem primarily from the general area of family background[24] and more specifically from factors such as educational level of the family, amount of English spoken at home, and

pupil attitudes and values.[25] It is in regard to this last factor that properly trained counselors can have a positive effect on the student.

But are our educational counselors properly trained? If so, what are the criteria for competence? A large study on minority counseling efficiency in inner-city Washington state schools indicated counselors were skilled but too often unavailable. Paraprofessionals were often used by students instead of counselors, because they were more likely to be minority, be younger, and be available.[26] The bottom line seems to be that counselors are fairly well trained but often misused by schools that employ them.

The counselor is not always referred to as "skilled", however. As with Anglo teachers and Mexican students, tensions are sometimes found to exist in a counseling situation involving a similar combination of ethnic groups. Once again, Anglos are criticized. The Anglo psychotherapist is seen to be lacking in knowledge of the Mexican culture, not skillful in uniquely Mexican problems and prejudiced. In addition, the Anglo psychotherapist tends to set low self-esteem contracts for the Mexican-American client.[27] If this is true, then the Anglo counselor must be aware of this problem and strive to achieve greater acceptance of his minority client.

Finally, it is not enough that the school counselor be versatile, skilled and accepting as regards his Mexican-American client, but he must also know which counseling methods work best with this type of student. There is supportive evidence for an alternation of group and individual counseling (when appropriate) being superior to any other approach with high school students.[28] Strictly group counseling and strictly individual counseling have also proved successful--infinitely successful when compared to no counseling at all. As for specific counseling models, a form of behavior rehearsal was found to be superior to therapeutic listening when counseling Mexican-American women.[29] The applicability of this study to the school setting is dubious, however, and no other research material on specific techniques was available.

SUMMARY

The role of the couselor in education is constantly expanding. As the complexity of the American educational scene increases, so does the complexity of the counselor's role. Many of these complexities can be attributed to the racially mixed composition of American schools--a composition that seems certain to become more mixed in future years. As these minorities have grown in number, most notably the Mexican-Americans and the Blacks, they have become increasingly vocal about their rights to an equal education; consequently, teachers and counselors alike have been forced to confront the fact that they have been doing a less-that-adequate job in dealing with racial minorities.

As a result, counselors today are receiving better, more specialized training to deal with the specific problems of prominent racial groups. Elementary couselors, an unheard of luxury in days past, are becoming more prevalent. At the other end of the age spectrum, counselors are working hand in hand with adult education and community leaders. There is an urgent need for bilingual counselors, minority counselors, placement counselors, vocational counselors, and threapy counselors. In short, there is a real opportunity within the field for one "to do his own thing."

The employment outlook isn't completely positive, however. The most serious threat to the ideal counseling program is, of course, money. All schools have couseling needs; not all schools have appropriate funds. Counselors

Counselors are, therefore, often overworked and used inappropriately. One good thing that may come out of the racial problems in our schools is a new emphasis--monetarily as well as philosophically--on the role of the counselor.

As regards the problems unique to the Mexican-American students, counselors in the future must make a greater effort to understand and accept these people if their educational lot is to be improved. Additional training, both in-service and institutional, will be means to help facilitate this end. If this condition is not met, the philosophical foundation upon which this country now stands will be further, and perhaps irrepairably, eroded.

FOOTNOTES

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5. Carter, op cit, p. 18

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8. John H. Burma, Mexican-Americans in the United States (Massachusetts: Schenkman Publishing Company, Inc., 1970 p. 108

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10. Carter, op cit, p. 62

11. William A. Johnson, "The Existing Conditions Concerning the Stereotyping of Certain Ethnic Groups," Dissertation Abstracts International,V34(7-A), 1974 p. 6932

12. Carter, op cit, p. 87

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17. Burma, op cit, p. 96

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